HOW CAN STUDENT-ATHLETES UTILIZE THEIR MEDIA PLATFORMS FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE? DEVELOPING AN EVIDENCE-BASED LEADERSHIP PROGRAM FOR STRATEGIC SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMUNICATION

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Research shows even though student-athletes often are highly motivated to contribute to their campus community (NCAA, 2014) and want to use their platform for social good (Kluch, 2021), they struggle to translate social values into social action (Gayles et al., 2012) and tend to be less engaged in political activities than their non-athlete peers (Hoffman et al., 2015). This study aimed to create an understanding of contemporary student-athletes' engagement in activist efforts on social media to empower them to use their communicative platforms for social good. A preliminary inductive thematic analysis of data obtained from nine participants (*) yielded five higher-order themes capturing athletes' experiences as they navigate various social media spaces for social and racial justice activism: (1) control of athletes' social media engagement, (2) (social) media as tool for dialogue on racial justice, (3) lack of protection and coping mechanisms, (4) negotiating self-presentation(s), and (5) moving beyond performative activism towards tangible actions.

Socio-Cultural Context of Study

In 2021, college sport has undergone transformational change due to a variety of societal crises affecting the industry. Aside from a global health crisis and new name, image, and likeness (NIL) legislation transforming the nature of college sport, the past two years were marked by the industry's (re)new(ed) commitment to racial and social justice in response to the horrific murders of Black Americans such as Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Both the ACC and its member institutions have started to reflect on their role in driving systemic change – and have committed to playing their part in facilitating such change. For instance, in September 2020, the newly established ACC Committee for Racial and Social Justice (CORE - Champions of Racial Equity) announced a series of initiatives focused on promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) competencies within the conference, empowering diverse individuals, and creating "meaningful, lasting change by improving systems, organizational structures, policies, practices and attitudes" (Atlantic Coast Conference, 2020, para. 10). Simultanouesly, ACC student-athletes have found their voices as agents for social change – at a time that has seen increased activism among student-athletes (Kluch, 2020), especially those identifying as members of historically underrepresented and minoritized groups (Mac Intosh et al., 2020). Insights from the 2020 NCAA Student-Athlete Activism and Racial Justice Engagement Study revealed that nearly 90% of student-athletes had racial justice conversations over the past year, almost 1 in 4 attended a protest, and more than half posted social justice content on social media (NCAA, 2020). In the themes outlined above, our project provides valuable insights into student-athletes' engagement in activism in and beyond the realm of social media.

Theme 1: Control of Athletes' Social Media Engagement

The participants in this study shared various ways in which they perceived their athletic departments to be trying to control their social media engagement, which could potentially hinder their engagement in activist efforts online. Participants identified this control to happen at a variety of levels, including micro- (e.g., team, coaches) and meso- (e.g., athletic department) levels. They

** Please note: This white paper was created based on preliminary results. We anticipate the study to be completed by spring 2023, and we will provide an updated white paper summarizing final results/implications by May 2023.*

called for more freedom to be given to student-athletes, so that they can control their activist narratives.

> *"I think that's also been something that I've struggled with, especially at my previous institution. It was like everything had to be approved on our own social media, and it took me a really long time to learn that, no, this is my identity, this is my platform, and this is my voice and I'm going to use it how I want."*

Theme 2: (Social) Media as Tool for Dialogue on Racial Justice

Participants explained that they took to social media to engage in dialogue on racial justice as well as use the various (social) media platforms available to them as tools to engage in difficult conversations. Often having experienced discrimination first hand, social media provided a platform to build community and model effective communication, while simultaenously challenging the prominent "shut up and dribble" narrative athletes (and, in particular, Black athletes) face when speaking up on social issues.

> *"I feel like social media, especially since you're behind a screen in a sense, you can say more ... Me kneeling for the anthem is going to give a different message than me saying [something] on social media because a lot of people correlate kneeling to being disrespectful to the military and the flag and everything. But if I'm saying why [I] kneel and that it's not disrespect to the flag or just military veterans, maybe they'll think of it differently. And I think [on] social media … you can explain yourself in a sense."*

Theme 3: Lack of Protection and Coping Mechanisms

Participants spoke of a lack of coping mechanisms for backlash received when speaking out on social media, calling for more rigorous support from athletic departments. The lack of protection made it harder for student-athletes to navigate the negative backlash they sometimes received, which led to potentially traumatic and jarring experiences for participants that turned them away from engaging on social media. As a result, they called on athletic departments to offer more protections for them, including training opportunities on how to cope with hate mail and other forms of targeted attacks.

> *"I feel like I see a lot of girls that want to use their platform. … they don't necessarily … how to combat some of the things that come at them and how you should deal with hate comments, or how [you] deal with people in your DMs and saying all this horrible stuff. And knowing all that is helpful, because the internet can be a really scary place."*
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> *"I followed everything … it was just too much for me. … And I could not get on Twitter without crying, frankly. So I … deactivated my account, everything, and I was off. Actually, my fiance was like, I do not think Twitter is good for you. And I think it's very toxic and it's taking a toll on her mental health."*

Theme 4: Negotiating Self-Presentation(s) Based on Context and Platform
Throughout the interviews, participants described how they presented themselves in different ways. Self-presentations ranged from cautious engagements on issues of racial justice in outlets perceived to be more public (e.g., Twitter) to being one's "real self" in outlets perceived to be more private (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram). Such self-presentations were an important aspect of negotiating their activist capital, finding one's "voice" on social media, and minimizing harm aimed at them.

> *"You always had to be very careful of exactly what you were putting out, what you were liking, retweeting, endorsing, of course. Because if it has … too much of that fire and brimstone and persecutive language, then you'd be viewed as differently. … We didn't really want to go out there and really say how we felt because … the playing time, the attention, all that stuff like that."*

Theme 5: Moving Beyond Performative Activism Towards Tangible Actions
The study was conducted in the aftermath of the murders of Black Americans at the hands of police, and participants repeatedly called out performative activism on social media, especially by athletic departments. For participants, social media was only *one* outlet of activist engagement, and they specifically argued for activism to go beyond social media towards more substantial actions for systemic social change – or, in other words, for activism to move from the digital to the tangible.

> *"I think activism is just standing up for what is right and not going with what's trending, what's clout chasing, which I think was a big thing during [the] George Floyd incident. Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery I feel like the posting of the black screen was just a big, oh, let me just show people that I'm not racist just by posting this black screen. That's not activism."*

Next Steps & Implications
The experiences of the participants show that NCAA Division I collegiate athletes, arguably the most visible and impactful level of U.S. intercollegiate athletics, are well aware of the power they hold with their social media presence. Yet these athletes have to navigate a variety of barriers ranging from controlling athletic departments and backlash from broader publics to moving their activist capital beyond the performative nature of social media to avenues more suitable for lasting social and racial justice impact.

In the wake of new NIL legislation, we are currently developing a curriculum for a workshop (series) on strategic social justice communication, which aims to provide student-athletes with the literacy and knowledge to utilize their communicative power for social justice purposes. We plan on facilitating a pilot workshop with student-athletes at the University of Louisville in January 2023. In times of growing interest in student-athletes' leadership development off the field, the project serves as a timely and valuable resource to anchor social consciousness and inclusive leadership in ACC student-athlete culture.